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St. Louis area firm named as contractor involved in Colorado river spill

http://www.stltoday.com/business/local/st-louis-area-firm-named-as-contractor-involved-in-colorado/article_326548c7-bf23-5cea-974f-f0271cc3013e.html

Updated at 11:30 a.m. with a statement from Environmental Restoration LLC.

A week after a 3-million gallon toxic waste spill fouled Colorado's Animas River, the contractor involved at work at the site was identified as Environmental Restoration LLC, a firm based in Fenton.

Officials with the Environmental Protection Agency said the company's crews worked under the direction of the EPA in consultation with Colorado's Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety.

The revelation came as the head of the EPA toured the river's sludge-coated banks on Wednesday, as the Obama administration sought to limit the environmental and political damage from the spill.

Environmental Restoration LLC posted a statement on its website in response to inquiries from the Post-Dispatch and other media confirming it was "onsite at the time of the release from the Gold King Mine."

The company's statement said its contract with the EPA contains "specific language requiring ER's confidentiality on all site matters." It said the EPA was in charge of providing information on the spill and the information it had provided so far has been "factual."

"(Environmental Restoration) honors our contractual confidentiality obligations to all of our clients, and cannot provide any additional information," the company said in the statement signed by its president and managing partner Dennis Greaney.

The company said it is the "largest provider of emergency response services" to the EPA and is a "prime contractor" in seven of the EPA's 10 regions. It is the prime contractor for EPA Region 8, which covers Colorado.

"Environmental Restoration" takes great pride in our staff and long history of working with the USEPA and commercial clients in protecting and cleaning up the environment on thousands of projects nationwide," the company concluded in its page-long statement. "We stand behind our project management team and labor force at the Silverton site."

EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy ordered a temporary halt to the agency's cleanup at the Gold King mine and several similar sites after traveling to the region to pledge a thorough investigation into an accident she has called "tragic and unfortunate."

"It is a heartbreaking situation," McCarthy said at a news conference in Durango, Colo., about 48 miles downstream from the site of the Aug. 5 spill. "We are going to be transparent and collaborative in making

sure people have the information they need."

The regulatory agency has been criticized for its response to the spill, which began as crews were investigating leaks from a toxic waste pond in the inactive gold mine north of Durango. An earthen barrier gave way, sending toxic wastewater into the Animas, turning the river bright orange-yellow for miles.

McCarthy met with Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper and Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., to coordinate responses to the spill.

"The good news is, the river seems to be restoring itself," she said. The EPA confirmed in a statement that new water-quality tests showed contaminant levels in the Animas near Durango had subsided to "pre-event conditions."

While no injuries or serious damage to wildlife have been reported, the spill raised levels of arsenic, lead and other toxins in the river for dozens of miles through southwest Colorado and northern New Mexico. Wastewater from hard-rock mines often contains heavy metals that can be toxic at high concentrations. Residue from spills can linger on the bottom of a river for months or years, to be redispersed with new storms and floods.

Traces of orange residue from iron were still visible on some riverbanks Wednesday, as state officials met to consider possible lawsuits against the EPA. They have complained about what they describe as a slow EPA response to the spill and inadequate precautions to prevent the accident from occurring.

"I was just horror-stricken that this could happen in our state," Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman, a Republican, told Denver's Fox 31 TV station after a Wednesday visit to the Animas River, near Durango.

Longtime foes of the EPA's pollution controls for air and water seized the opportunity to bash the agency.

"This disaster emphasizes the need for the EPA to focus on fulfilling its existing responsibilities, instead of focusing its resources on imposing expensive new regulations that kill jobs and hurt family budgets," Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said in a statement.

At the time of the spill, the EPA was attempting to determine how to deal with a common pollution problem in many parts of the Rocky Mountain West: the steady leaching of toxic waste from hundreds of hard-rock mines scattered throughout the region. At the Gold King site, the crew was moving heavy equipment near the mine's wastewater pond when the barrier gave way.

EPA officials accused critics of seeking to obscure a larger pollution problem affecting waterways through the West.

"EPA was assessing cleanup efforts in a mine that had been leaching toxic material for years," said an EPA official familiar with the accident, speaking on the condition of anonymity because the accident investigation is still underway.

Jacob Barker of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

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